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Poetry Project Essay on “Annabel Lee” – Romantic Period

Famous for his plethora of melancholy and depressing pieces of literature, Edgar Allan Poe is perhaps one of the most famous authors from the Romantic period. Poe’s famous last poem, “Annabel Lee” was published two days after his death and dealt with his most common theme: the death of a young and beautiful woman. Poe gives this poem fame and realism through the employment of his morose diction and personal experiences.

Poe’s poem is vividly characterized by the morose diction that conveys to the audience just how pained and heartbroken the speaker is. The speaker and the title character Annabel Lee are both young children in love when Annabel Lee dies. The piece immediately becomes melancholy when the poem opens with “It was many and many a year ago,” (1), automatically conveying to the reader that the speaker has been living in grief for many years now. While the poem may seem to begin as a happy and jovial with the speaker’s memories such as the girl who had “no other thought than to love” (5-6) and “loved with a love that was more than love” (9), the reader must bear in mind that Poe is notorious for penning depressing tales of heartbreak and woe. As the poem progresses past the first two stanzas, the reader is introduced to the “chilling” (16) gust of wind that killed the beautiful Annabel Lee. This third stanza is where the tone shifts from one of jovial reverence to glum reminiscence. “Bore her away” (18), “envying” (22), and “killing” (26) are just some few choice words that Poe utilizes when his tone shifts to the darker side of his emotional scale. The entire poem ends on a depressing note when the speaker informs his audience that, by Annabel Lee’s “tomb by the side of the sea” (41) is where he sleeps each night.

In addition to Poe’s gloomy diction, he also employs personal experiences in order to establish the poem’s theme and realism. First addressed by John Cowper Powys, as claimed in the article “Criticism: Annabel Lee,” there is a very strong and strangely close relation between the speaker of the poem and Edgar Allan Poe himself. Both men had a woman in his life that “was a child” (7) and both women were killed by something natural. Annabel Lee was killed by a “chilling” (16) wind, while Poe’s wife (his cousin Virginia Clemm) died of tuberculosis. The fact that “Annabel Lee” was written two years after Clemm’s death and the speaker of the poem is grieving years after his beloved’s death is another parallel between the speaker and Poe. After Virginia’s death, Poe became even more depressed and even more drunk, aspects of his life that shone through his work constantly. The fact that Poe incorporates these very personal and saddening aspects of his life into his work make his pieces even more believable and chilling. Knowing that the fictitious events of Poe’s pieces are rooted in reality and may actually be records of truth forces the reader to realize that the emotional depth is something unbelievable and realize that there is pain and suffering this terrible in the world. The reality behind “Annabel Lee” also enhances the theme of a beautiful woman’s death. How you ask? It shows that Poe’s retelling of such a death is not just in accordance to the standard writings of the Romantic era, but is a recording of personal history. Without the realism in Poe’s work “Annabel Lee” would seem like just another piece of poetry from the Romantic Period with little meaning and pure fiction. It would not have the same effect it does on audiences today.

“Annabel Lee” was one of Poe’s finest masterpieces and remains that way into the modern world of literature. Though literary conventions and standards have evolved and changed since the Romantic Period, it is clear that Poe was one of the forefathers for modern literature. With his morose diction and realistic background incorporated into the plot of the poem, “Annabel Lee” becomes more than just a sad poem; it becomes a tragically beautiful tribute to a deceased lover. Although not appreciated in his own time and place, “Annabel Lee” has become one of Poe’s most renowned and widely studied poems, proving that his emotional depth and gloomy topics were not just strange; they were brilliant.

Works Cited

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